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Cards on the Table

by Daniel Judd

Jay Veal was a strong believer in lady luck. He had wooed her as a young man on the streets of West Ham, looking for a pearl, a cat's eye or a tiger under one of three shifting egg cups. Eagle-eyed, he'd swoop and scoop up the right one, to gasps from the gathering crowd and mutterings from their 'bottom of the bill' showman.

Raised on Gin Rummy and turning 21, he was bitten by the bug. He turned trickster and with Micky the Fish as his Shrill he toured the East and West End, urging Marks to Find the Lady and part with their beer money. Three-card Monte his mates called him, so synonymous was he with the game that he played.

But he got greedy. It wasn't just a way of topping up his barman's wage but a living, chasing luck like the policeman that had been tipped off by a disgruntled victim to his shady card shark game. With no work in the offing what was there to lose? Bigger games, with more at stake, nobbling greyhounds at Mile End, running books on, well, just about anything.

With the outbreak of war, Three-card Monte became the full Monty. Everyone was desperate to earn a crust to take a risk and Jay had no qualms about indulging their fantasies.

With such success he had no trouble finding a lady, especially on a Saturday night splashing his cash when everyone else had already spent theirs on the Friday. That's when he met Jeannie hanging about outside The Bull, larking about with that Phyll. She wasn't like the others or her mate. The 'first you borrow, then you beg' girls, he called them. She was a touch of class, well, for round here, anyway. She stood her hand *and* her ground. And the banter flowed as freely as the beer.

He wanted her, but even though he'd charmed many a bird from the trees, it just didn't happen.

Weeks passed but all he got was a peck on the cheek, grabbed before she ran for her bus. His mates teased him, saying his luck had run out. They couldn't fathom it, and neither could he. Until the letter came.

It was a Friday so when he left to look for her, he wasn't certain of success. Saturday was their night. Beer, banter, chips. But then he remembered, it was Phyll's birthday, so they'd be at her folks, trying to convince themselves that life really was worth celebrating.

Round the back, he found her, taking a drag on some old geezer's fag. He didn't tell her about the call-up papers, but he did say he had to go away for a bit. He muttered something about biting off more than he could chew, needing to lie low.

The walk to the bus stop become one long glorious snog. There was one thing Jay wasn't prepared to gamble on and that was his life, and it was as if Jeannie sensed it. No questions asked, no teasing of the truth. The bus was missed. As if their dizzy and joyous lust had been beamed down by the moon, following their every footstep.

They did it in her dead dad's garden shed and it was everything she hoped it would be. But not for Jay. He felt like a con; the biggest cheat. He knew he'd never see her again.